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Chair: Mr. John Brassard



Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC)):
Good morning, everyone. I'm going to call this meeting to order.

[Translation]

Welcome to meeting number 114 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h), the committee is commencing its study of the impact of disinformation and of misinformation on the work of parliamentarians.

Before we begin, I would like to remind all members and other meeting participants in the room of the following important preventive measures.

[English]

To prevent disruptive and potentially harmful audio feedback incidents that can cause injuries, all in-person participants are reminded to keep their earpieces away from the microphones at all times.

As indicated in the communiqué from the Speaker to all members on Monday, April 29, the following measures have been taken to help prevent audio feedback incidents.

All earpieces have been replaced by a model that greatly reduces the probability of audio feedback. The new earpieces are black in colour, whereas the former earpieces were grey. Please only use a black, approved earpiece.

By default, all unused earpieces will be unplugged at the start of the meeting. When you're not using your earpiece, please place it face down in the middle of the sticker for this purpose, which you will find on the table, as indicated. Please consult the cards on the table for guidelines to prevent audio feedback incidents.

The room layout has been adjusted to increase the distance between microphones and reduce the chance of feedback from an ambient earpiece.

[Translation]

These measures are in place so that we can conduct our business without interruption and protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters. Thank you all for your co-operation.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection

tests for witnesses, I am informing the committee that all witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

[English]

Again, I want to make sure that you wait until you're recognized before speaking. I also remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair. I don't want to see any cross-table comments.

I would like to welcome our witnesses today for the first hour.

From the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, we have Jakub Kalenský, deputy director, Hybrid Influence COI. Welcome, sir. From the Media Ecosystem Observatory, we have Aengus Bridgman, assistant professor. As an individual, we have Mr. Kenny Chiu, a former member of Parliament.

Thank you all for being here.

Mr. Kalenský, you have up to five minutes to address the committee. I'd like you to go first. Please start.

Mr. Jakub Kalenský (Deputy Director, COI Hybrid Influence, European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats): Thank you very much, and let me thank you also for inviting me here. It is an honour both for me and for the centre of excellence.

In the limited time, allow me to address only two very brief points: one, what the hybrid CoE is and what we are trying to do to help our participating states to counter the threat of disinformation; and two, what the best practices are in countering disinformation that we have identified.

The centre of excellence is an international organization for EU member states and NATO allied countries, so Canada is a member as well. Until recently, we had a second colleague from the Canadian government here. Currently, we have 35 participating states, so out of the group of EU NATO countries, we are missing only the last one.

Our mission is to strengthen the participating states' security by providing expertise and training for countering hybrid threats. In order to achieve these goals, we have different products, you could say. We publish reports. We organize events like conferences, seminars and workshops. We run tailored products like training and exercises. We have these products also in the disinformation file, which is my responsibility.

Recently we published a report on the role of humour in countering disinformation. We published a report on the Ukrainian countermeasures against Russian disinformation, because Ukraine is the country that has the most experience with Russian disinformation. We published a report on the impact and success of disinformation campaigns, because we saw that this is a topic that our participating states frequently struggle with: How can we estimate what the impact is, what the effect is of the work that the information aggressors are doing?

We also run a workshop for practitioners in countering disinformation. Every year, we gather the people from our participating states in Helsinki and have them exchange best practices, lessons learned, what works, what doesn't work, what the gaps are and what more needs to be done. We are also designing a brand new disinformation exercise where we would try to bring the knowledge to the capitals to do some capacity building there, train 30, 40, 50 people in a country on countering disinformation.

I'll move to the second topic, regarding what are the best practices we have identified. Let me kick it off with the observation that I believe it is necessary to implement many countermeasures simultaneously. Some people seem to think that one countermeasure will solve the whole problem. Some people think that about media literacy. Some people think that about strategic communication. I even registered people who are working just on mocking disinformers and saying that this is the only tool we need and nothing else is necessary. I don't believe it's true. I think we need to apply more countermeasures, because each of them will solve only a part of the problem. If we want to solve the whole problem, we need more countermeasures. Whole-of-society problems require whole-of-society solutions.

In the group of countermeasures, we identified four bigger groups. I call it four lines of defence. First, it's about detecting and documenting what is happening in the disinformation space. It sounds primitive, but unfortunately we still don't have a full idea, especially about the quantitative aspects. How many disinformation channels are there? How many messages per day do they spread? How many people do they persuade? Imagine if you were fighting the COVID pandemic without knowing how many people got the virus, how many people were vaccinated, how many people died. It would be almost impossible. Unfortunately, we are in this situation with disinformation. It's very difficult to design adequate solutions when we don't have this data.

The second line is about raising awareness. Whereas in the first line we are trying to get more data, in the second line we are trying to spread this information among more audiences. Here I believe the number of actors is really key, because each of them has only a very limited audience. The audiences nowadays are significantly more fragmented than they were 10 or 15 years ago, and therefore we need more actors who will be addressing the fragmented audiences that we have nowadays.

The third line is about trying to repair the systemic weaknesses in the information ecosystem. This is where media literacy comes in. This is where strategic communication comes in, in order to prevent the distrust of the population towards their institutions, which is a weakness that the disinformers are very often exploiting. This is also where the pressure on social media companies comes in, be-

cause the social media environment, unfortunately, is still a weakness that gets exploited by the information aggressors.

• (1105)

Finally—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Kalenský. We're over time.

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: I'm sorry about that.

The Chair: If you want to pick up any of those points, you can do that during Q and A.

I'll go to Mr. Bridgman now.

Mr. Bridgman, you have up to five minutes to address the committee. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Aengus Bridgman (Assistant Professor, Media Ecosystem Observatory): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, everyone.

My name is Aengus Bridgman. I'm an assistant professor at McGill University, where I direct the Media Ecosystem Observatory. We're Canada's leading research entity dedicated to understanding and addressing online harms. We also anchor the Canadian Digital Media Research Network.

I will focus my comments on two thoughts today. The first is around this idea that misinformation and disinformation are an existential threat, and that they are the existential threat facing democracies today. There's been some recent international polling that suggests people are very profoundly concerned about this, and for you as parliamentarians and, of course, for the study in question, this is a real concern.

Research over the last five years that I and my team and colleagues have done has really shown that misinformation and disinformation are part of the Canadian information ecosystem. They are there—and I'm really looking forward to hearing comments from the third speaker today about some of the impacts of it—but this is not something that is changing the outcomes of elections or dramatically altering Canadians' attitudes and behaviours.

There are a few reasons for that. First, most Canadians, most people are quite inattentive to politics. Individual stories, especially misinformation and disinformation stories, float by unheeded. Those who do hear them tend to already be predisposed to hearing that information, and maybe already have attitudes in line with that misinformation. What you're seeing there is this dynamic. Yes, it is occurring, but the actual systematic impact is relatively low. We studied that by looking at large-scale digital trace data coupled with nationally represented survey data. We did studies in the last two federal elections and the last Quebec election, and for all three we concluded that the role that misinformation played was relatively minor, although we did document numerous instances of it.

That gets to the second point I want to highlight, which is that there's this tendency to think of misinformation and disinformation from a harm perspective, from a securitization perspective, that they are something we need to protect against. There is value in that sort of thinking, but it's not the only way to think about it. I think it's very important to try to understand instead that misinformation and disinformation—false information—are a regular, consistent part of the information ecosystem and of politics, and their existence does not mean that we need to stamp them out or that we need to fight them. The mere fact that they exist does not mean that they are deserving of combatting.

Instead, we can think, “Okay. This is an information ecosystem. This is something that can be studied. This is something that can be made more resilient.” We can inform the population and do media literacy, of course, but there are other ways we can prepare our population. We can say, “Okay. This is the type of information you're going to encounter while you're using digital media and while you're trying to understand the political world. Here are some of the dynamics.” We can better understand those dynamics and better try to address them collectively as a society.

The first point is that misinformation and disinformation are out there. It's not that it's inconsequential—it does matter—but it is not existential, at least not yet in Canada to the extent that there is this pervasive feeling that this is deeply damaging. It matters. We need to study it, address it and think about it in a holistic way, but we don't need to stamp it out. Even the notion that it could be stamped out or addressed in that way is spurious.

I'm happy to talk about either of those points during the question and answer period.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bridgman.

Mr. Chiu, you have five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Kenny Chiu (Former Member of Parliament, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen, as we navigate through the labyrinth of disinformation and misinformation, I am compelled to share personal experiences that underscore the urgency of our task. Whether concocted by state actors, malicious groups or individuals, the intent is very clear. The intent is manipulation. It seeks to sow discord, erode trust and undermine the foundations of truth. In the crucible of Canada's electoral process, truth and deception collided, leaving lasting scars on our democracy.

What is misinformation? Let me give the example of assault rifles and campaign literature.

Imagine the quiet streets of Steveston—Richmond East during the last election. Concerned and engaged Chinese residents approached me and my dedicated volunteers. They brandished a card dropped in the mail. It was an innocuous piece of paper in their native Chinese language, advancing a dangerous falsehood. It asserted that a Conservative government would revoke the prohibition on assault rifles. This was a chilling prospect, especially for many community members who hailed from a culture with strict firearms prohibitions.

Here's the twist: It was untrue. The Conservatives had no such intention, yet misinformation, akin to a stealthy intruder, permeated our community, sowing seeds of fear and mistrust.

Let me tell you another cynical story. This time it's about disinformation. Like an architect crafting an elaborate facade, complete with fictional walls, doors and windows, disinformation constructs an entire structure from scratch to intentionally deceive its audience.

Now, let me introduce my former opponent. In my view, his ascent to power was paved with disinformation. Perhaps it was through a calculated strategy or, at the very least, he was a willing participant in a now proven disinformation campaign. He willingly embraced and propagated accusations targeting Conservatives, including our then leader Erin O'Toole and me, accusing Conservatives of racism and of harbouring anti-Asian sentiments. Exploitative and manipulative, these allegations linked to foreign states reverberated through biased media channels and chat groups.

If holding the Indian government accountable for alleged actions in Canada is not anti-Indian, why would countering the confirmed clandestine and deceptive efforts of Chinese Communists in Canada ever be considered anti-Chinese?

However, there's more. He publicly pledged to the Chinese audience that he would not support a foreign influence registry. This promise directly contradicted the then minister of public safety's announcement back in 2022 and 2023.

As we gather here, I'm reminded of the diabolical propaganda techniques employed by authoritarian regimes throughout history, which involved repeating colossal falsehoods until they became an accepted truth. Ordinary citizens bombarded with these orchestrated lies found their minds ensnared in a web of deception. Hatred and prejudice flourished as the strategy took root.

Today, we face an even vaster digital battlefield where disinformation thrives. Our diaspora cultural communities, often isolated and insular, bear the brunt of these campaigns. Their reliance on ethnic media and foreign apps, while essential for maintaining connections, renders them vulnerable. Whether foreign regimes aim to meddle in our electoral process or domestic actors plot to mislead Canadians, the consequences are dire.

To counter this manipulation, we must champion a vibrant and engaged ethnic media community—one that distinguishes facts from allegations, empowers informed debates and refuses to be silenced. Let us heed the lessons of history, fortify our defences with media literacy and stand firm against corrosive forces that seek to manipulate our minds and fracture our unity.

Thank you for your attention. May our commitment to democracy in action guide us toward a future where the light of truth dispels the shadows of misinformation and disinformation.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chiu.

Thank you, everyone, for your opening statements.

We're going to start with our first six-minute rounds. For that, we'll go to Mr. Cooper.

You have six minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chiu, it is well documented that you were the subject of a disinformation campaign directed by the Beijing-based Communist regime during the 2021 election, which targeted the Chinese diaspora in your riding. Even though the government had information that you were being targeted, that information was not passed on to you, and voters in your riding were kept in the dark.

Based on your experience, would you agree that the measures put in place by this Liberal government, supposedly to counter foreign interference, failed?

Mr. Kenny Chiu: I think there has been much commentary on this. I agree with some of the commentary that says that obviously the Liberal government set this up to catch the Conservatives benefiting from Russian disinformation, and they were caught by surprise by the Communist Chinese campaigning to help the Liberals themselves.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Beijing's disinformation campaign attacked your character and spread outright lies about your position and the position of the Conservative Party on a range of issues.

Can you speak about that and what impact this disinformation campaign has had on your reputation in your community?

Mr. Kenny Chiu: I think there is a problem with your question, sir, because it presumes that disinformation and misinformation are spread only during election time. As a matter of fact, that is not true. Even in the public inquiry into foreign interference, when the hearings were being conducted, there was disinformation.

For example, when MP Han Dong testified, there were articles written that said that Mr. Han Dong was persecuted in Canada because of his mainland Chinese background. This is completely untrue. We, as Canadians, know that, but many in the communities don't because of the parallel universe they live in.

● (1120)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Not only did the mechanisms that the Liberal government set up to counter foreign interference completely fail to counter the disinformation campaign in your riding, but based upon what I am hearing from your testimony, it's even worse than that. Insofar as I understand it, the Liberal Party took advantage of Beijing's disinformation narrative, amplified it and even created complementary misinformation and disinformation products targeting the Chinese diaspora community in Steveston—Richmond East.

Is that a fair characterization of what happened? Could you elaborate upon that?

Mr. Kenny Chiu: That's my observation in the riding that I ran for re-election in, Steveston—Richmond East in B.C. Certainly, that's what I observed and felt.

I always put myself in my opponent's shoes. If I observed disinformation being propagated against him, a character assassination, I would actually stand to defend him because it is not true. It is not the right way to conduct our democracy.

However, unfortunately, that was not the case during the election in 2021. It was obvious that there was a targeted campaign attack against me and that I was basically alone.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It's very disturbing to learn that the Liberal Party actively amplified Beijing disinformation. They were not a mere bystander to it. It's worse than turning a blind eye, that's for sure.

Now, it came to light at the public inquiry on foreign interference that during the 2019 election, the Prime Minister's department, the PCO, detected disinformation about Justin Trudeau in an article circulating on Facebook. The Prime Minister's department asked Facebook to remove that article because they said that it risked threatening the integrity of the election.

By contrast, when the Prime Minister's department was asked about the disinformation targeting you and the Conservative Party that was circulating on WeChat during the 2021 election, and about why they didn't ask for that disinformation to be taken down, a representative from the Prime Minister's department said dismissively that "the content would likely only reach Chinese diaspora readers."

What do you make of that explanation, and what does it say about how this government operates?

Mr. Kenny Chiu: It touches my very inner identity to its core, because I always believe that the Prime Minister is wrong that Canada does not have a systemic and structural discrimination against a certain group. However, what I heard during the hearings shook that a little bit because it looks like there are some Canadians who are more valuable and worthy of protection than others.

Canada has a multicultural society, and definitely every Canadian deserves to be protected. It looks like the mechanism they put in place does not handle disinformation and misinformation being spread using non-official languages.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chiu and Mr. Cooper.

We go now to Mr. Housefather for six minutes.

Go ahead.

Mr. Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Kalenský, my first question is for you. On October 7, Hamas terrorists attacked Israel, creating the biggest massacre of Jews since the Second World War and the Holocaust. Since then, there's been a great increase in anti-Semitism all across the world, including here in North America, where today college campuses are being occupied by people spreading anti-Semitic messaging. How has Russia been involved in fomenting that happening?

• (1125)

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: Russia is always happy about any single opportunity where they can increase the polarization of the audiences. Obviously, this conflict is one of the most polarizing topics, so they will be using it to do their work. The aim with which they are doing it is probably to spread more of the anti-western, anti-American sentiment, with the U.S. still being the chief target of their disinformation campaigns, and probably with the logic that Israel is perceived as the biggest ally of the U.S.

I think the motivation is this primitive. In order to denigrate the U.S., they will be spreading a lot of anti-Israeli sentiments.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: They're joining with Iran in doing that. How is Iran involved in terms of Iran's sponsorship of terrorist organizations, Hamas and Hezbollah? How are they working with Russia to spread disinformation on social media?

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: I have to admit, I do not have good information on how they co-operate. There have been some reports about Russia co-operating with China in the information space, but I'm not aware of reports about the co-operation with Iran. However, I would not be surprised if it was happening. Russia is happy for any help it can get.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: When people can create divisions in North American societies, for example by amplifying, as Russia does, on social media tropes such as that Jews control the world or that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to their own countries, how does that help foment dissension and division in North America, creating an opportunity for Russia to divert the world's attention from the war that it's launched against Ukraine?

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: This will be definitely part of the reason why they're doing that. If more people focus on what's happening in

the Middle East, fewer people will be focusing on what's happening in Ukraine.

The way they'll try to increase the polarization will be to spread very extreme messaging, but sometimes they're doing it from both sides of the barricades. We saw the Russians organizing both pro-Muslim and anti-Muslim rallies in the United States. We saw them spreading both radically feminist messaging and very anti-feminist messaging. We saw them spreading both aggressively pro-migration content and anti-migration content.

The point is to portray the other side of the barricade as unreasonable and something you cannot agree with. If you exaggerate the demands or the statements of the other side, then you decrease the possibility of reasonable discussion.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Have you seen evidence of Russia amplifying and increasing its social media reach following the October 7 attack on Israel?

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: I'm not aware of any inauthentic campaigns in this regard, but it might just be that I haven't paid enough attention.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: There's an article you're quoted in, in Politico in Europe, which says that an organization called the Alliance for Securing Democracy compiled stats that in the seven weeks after the conflict began, "Russian Facebook accounts have posted 44,000 times compared to a mere 14,000 posts in the seven weeks before the conflict began", thus a tripling of their social media posts. This "activity on Facebook was shared almost 400,000 times collectively, a fourfold increase compared to posts published before the conflict."

I've seen a number of different studies about social media—and I think we'll have a witness on Thursday who will be speaking to this—that talk about how Russia is trying to foment strife in North America, in Canada and the United States, turning us against each other to divert attention away from its own misdeeds in Ukraine.

I think I'm almost finished, so I'll just leave it with you if you have any last comments, Mr. Kalenský.

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: I agree with you that they would be doing that, but sometimes they are just following the news cycle. When we had the COVID pandemic, they were focusing on COVID. Now, because media focuses so much on what's happening in the Middle East, they use this, but it might be something different in a few weeks again.

The Chair: You still have a minute, Mr. Housefather.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I didn't realize I had another minute.

Let me turn my attention to you, Mr. Bridgman. You haven't had any questions yet. Do you have anything to say about my questions on Russia and what Russia is doing to foment disinformation in North America?

• (1130)

Mr. Aengus Bridgman: Yes. Thank you for the opportunity.

Very quickly, this is absolutely a phenomenon. Russia, Iran, and other entities do try to manipulate the information ecosystem in a country like Canada. That is a phenomenon. We need to understand it and we need to better study it. Some of the work I do is really about trying to link entities from foreign countries and their penetration of the Canadian information ecosystem. I can certainly talk more about that.

One thing that's really key here and that I really want to stress is that when we're talking about misinformation and disinformation, especially as it relates to the work of parliamentarians, a lot of this is domestic. It's not just the international that is driving polarization, driving toxicity and driving these things in our debate. They attempt to exacerbate it. As Mr. Kalenský was saying, they use opportunities afforded by our political environment—events and moments in Canada or in the United States or in other countries when there's political tension—and try to amplify that.

There needs to be a concerted effort collectively to say, okay, here's a moment when they're trying to polarize us. We need to take a step back. We're polarized on this issue. There's a problem here and we're going to have a heated debate.

It's not just because of them—

The Chair: I'm sorry, sir. That one minute of grace turned into one minute of overtime.

[Translation]

Ms. Gaudreau, welcome to the committee. You have six minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, dear witnesses. This study is a very important one for our democracy.

I'm trying to acquire a better understanding of the situation. We know that misinformation and disinformation can have consequences. We've heard two different standpoints, but I'll begin by asking where these activities coming from, why they exist, and what their causes are.

I'd like the two online witnesses to answer my question.

[English]

The Chair: I'll start with you, Mr. Bridgman. Go ahead, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Aengus Bridgman: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The question here is about where it comes from. In regular political discourse, there is—

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: You can speak to me in French.

Mr. Aengus Bridgman: I know, but honestly, it would be better for everyone if I could answer in English.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'm the one who asked the question and I asked it in French, so I would prefer an answer in French, please.

[English]

Mr. Aengus Bridgman: Okay.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Gaudreau, if Mr. Bridgman is unable to answer in French, he can answer in English.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Yes, of course.

The Chair: I've stopped the clock, Mr. Bridgman.

[English]

I'd like you to give your answer in whatever language you feel comfortable with, sir. Go ahead, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Aengus Bridgman: Out of respect, I'll try to answer in French.

You're asking about the sources of misinformation and disinformation. In politics, there is always debate over facts. The difference between misinformation and disinformation is not always neat and clear. Sometimes, as Mr. Chiu was saying, it's obvious that there is disinformation, but there are genuine debates over most of the facts, and it's the role of politicians, among others, to navigate through it all, to listen, to speak out and to find the truth together, or to just accept that they have differing opinions. That's politics. So there is always misinformation and disinformation, and I would say it's pervasive throughout the system—

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'm going to interrupt you because I don't have a lot of time and I'd like to discuss the results of your survey, which give me cause for concern.

You said that there are always going to be threats, but that they are not existential threats that could change the outcome of an election. What does that amount to? When I read the reports, I didn't get the impression that there was any impact at all.

Are you familiar with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's report, which mentions serious repercussions for democracy? I'd like to hear what you have to say about that and about the surveys you conducted in connection with the last two elections.

Mr. Aengus Bridgman: In 2021, we did a survey based on a representative sample of the population, and in particular our Chinese-Canadian population. We monitored changes of opinion among Canadians during the election. If there had been a highly effective disinformation campaign, by which I mean that it really changed people's opinions, we would have seen it in the survey results. But we didn't see much of a change. That doesn't mean that no individual ridings were affected and there was evidence that some were. But we didn't see an opinion change at the national level. It's therefore very important to acknowledge that it exists, but the longer-term effects can be pernicious—

• (1135)

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: What do you mean by “longer term”? It's important.

Mr. Aengus Bridgman: To some extent, the studies showed that one of the most serious consequences of misinformation is a loss of confidence in politics. Over the past five years, there has been a change in people's confidence in the media, politicians and journalists. This significant change of approximately 10 points in the surveys is mainly the outcome of disinformation and misinformation.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Mr. Chair, I'd like to ask Mr. Bridgman to provide us with the survey findings and the repercussions of the changes we've been discussing. It would be very important and helpful to the committee.

I'd like to discuss the risks. I haven't heard all of Mr. Kalenský's information about countering measures, detection, documentation, awareness-raising for the many stakeholders, and fixing weaknesses. I'd like to ask him to finish his comments on the four best practices.

[English]

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: Thank you very much.

Before I talk about the fourth line, let me briefly touch upon the first question you had. I'm sorry that I won't manage to give my reply in French. My French is horrible, despite my having spent three years in Brussels.

The Chair: Sir, you have 45 seconds, so you're going to have to go quickly, please.

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: Okay.

What is the course? For Russia, this is seemingly a non-military measure to achieve military goals. They are very obvious about this. For them, it's a measure to facilitate military operations. The annexation of Crimea, to which there was close to no reaction, is probably the biggest example of that, but we have also seen them succeed in influencing our decision-making following the full-scale invasion in 2022. Russia is very open about the fact that their pseudo-journalists are part of the rank and file of the military. They are receiving military awards for their work. Russia is openly telling us that.

The fourth line I did not mention is about limiting, punishing and deterring the information aggressors. Whereas in the first three lines we are focusing on ourselves, on building up our defence, in the fourth line we are actually trying to catch the aggressor. The first three lines are about building up our immunity and focusing on exercise and eating healthy. The fourth line is about trying to arrest the person who is shooting people in the head.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kalenský and Mr. Bridgman.

Mr. Bridgman, could you follow up on Ms. Gaudreau's request and send the survey results to the committee clerk by Friday? I think that would give you enough time.

Mr. Aengus Bridgman: Yes, of course. We've already published one study on this topic and we could also write something for you that provides further details on this issue.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Bridgman.

[English]

We are going to go to Mr. Green for six minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Green.

• (1140)

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I have to say, I feel as though I've been living in a bit of a parallel universe when Mr. Bridgman states that he doesn't view this as an existential threat.

I wonder, Mr. Bridgman, whether through your work there was any study of the phenomenon that happened with the truckers' takeover of our capital, the shutdown of ports and bridges, and the civil unrest that was caused coming out of COVID, largely based on conspiracy theories regarding vaccines, misinformation and disinformation, both domestic and foreign. I wonder if you could speak to that. Did your studies take that into account?

I have to tell you that later on tonight I'm going to be working with a group that is dealing specifically with the Emergencies Act. The Emergencies Act was one of the most severe measures in our democracy, triggered by what I would say, after almost two years of reflection, was the high prevalence of misinformation and disinformation.

Can you comment on the work you're doing and whether you covered that local phenomenon, including many of the foreign actors who were involved in that campaign?

Mr. Aengus Bridgman: Yes, I fear I've given the impression that I don't think misinformation and disinformation are potential existential threats. Instead, what I'm saying is that today in Canada, from what we've observed in terms of the impacts of incidences of misinformation and disinformation, it hasn't yet risen to the level of election threat or existential threat to democracy.

You raised the trucker protest. That's a great example of a mix of two phenomena occurring. One involves misinformation and disinformation. Again, I am happy to provide this to the committee. I published several academic papers looking at misinformation and disinformation during COVID-19. They were, in particular, about the influence of a lot of the misinformation circulating in the United States and its profound impact on the digital ecosystem up here. I certainly have observed that. It does matter. It is consequential.

There is also the other dimension, of politics. We can't confuse the two. We can't say, just because there is misinformation and disinformation behind a political phenomenon or as part of a political phenomenon, that the political phenomenon wouldn't exist without that misinformation and disinformation, that it wouldn't have occurred absent those, and that the solution to that political movement is to stamp out, reduce, remove or counter just the misinformation and disinformation part. It's not necessarily true that we can just—

Mr. Matthew Green: I'll interject for a moment.

While I appreciate the distinction between correlation and causation, I think it's safe to say that we wouldn't have ended up in a scenario that resulted in invoking, for the second time in our history, the War Measures Act, or the Emergencies Act in this iteration. There was a conspiracy based on clear misinformation around vaccines tied to tropes about world control via the World Economic Forum and the World Health Organization. Indeed, we certainly have political actors—particularly among our friends in the Conservative caucus—who continue to espouse these types of conspiracies.

I would put to you that it's my assertion that it's an underlying pressure on this. Had that topic not been perpetrated in that way, the politicians at the end of the continuum wouldn't have had the material for the kind of ridiculous rhetoric that led to the shutting down of our country and, ultimately, the extreme measures that were taken vis-à-vis the Emergencies Act.

Going back to this, logic says that if there's no misinformation or disinformation to hang their hat on, malicious political actors on the other side wouldn't have the material to fan the kinds of flames that end up being existential threats. I say that because, while it is true there was a relatively peaceful de-escalation of that moment, it is also true that it led to an insurrection on January 6 in the United States of America. There are numerous examples around the world where disinformation is used to fuel genocidal rhetoric.

We've heard about a lot of different state actors here. We'll get into more in further rounds. I'm wondering, however, how you reconcile that.

Mr. Aengus Bridgman: I have two quick things.

I absolutely agree that misinformation and disinformation can exacerbate political anger in a huge way and generate moments like January 6 and the trucker protest. These can be strongly linked to misinformation and disinformation.

Misinformation and disinformation are consequential. In fact, one thing we have repeatedly shown in our studies is that they don't need to reach the broader population. You just need to reach a small but active enough segment and have a small but highly dedicated group of individuals who have misperceptions and enormous political anger—which is partly born of misinformation and disinformation. That can have a huge political impact.

I completely agree with you there.

● (1145)

Mr. Matthew Green: When I talk about an existential risk, it is clear that misinformation and disinformation are used to target minority communities. I'll give you an example.

White nationalism and neo-Nazism in this country vilify Muslims, minorities and trans folks, resulting in perpetrated violence occurring. I would share with you the fire bombing of the Ibrahim Jame mosque right here. People are radicalized online by misinformation and disinformation campaigns.

I would also put to you that the events that occurred around the trucker convoy made it feel unsafe for parliamentarians to show up to work. Just a week ago, I had a rock thrown through my window.

The violent political climate we're in is an existential risk to our democratic institutions.

Would you not agree?

Mr. Aengus Bridgman: The phenomenon you've described is absolutely an existential risk. All I can say is that in terms of linking directly to election-level outcomes, we've not seen that yet. It doesn't mean that misinformation is not potentially deeply harmful or damaging to democracy in other ways.

The Chair: We're going to start our second round for five minutes.

Go ahead.

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Thanks very much, Chair, and thank you to our witnesses for being here.

Mr. Chiu, the information you've provided this committee certainly shows an astounding double standard that existed between the way the Prime Minister's Office treated a perceived threat of disinformation targeting their political fortunes versus the political fortunes of their political opponents—and that is not just the Office of the Prime Minister, but the establishment of government and the massive resources that exist, whether they be directly with the security establishment and intelligence apparatus or the communications capacity of a government the size of the Government of Canada.

Is that something you'd agree with? Also, would you have any further comments on that double standard?

Mr. Kenny Chiu: I certainly get that impression myself, as well. The panel of five and the SITE task force are decision-makers who aggregate and assess based on aggregated information that is provided to them, so they are very far from where disinformation and misinformation happen locally.

Canada has 338 ridings right now. There are many communities and ridings that are relatively isolated, perhaps. Steveston—Richmond East, for example, is in the city of Richmond, where the population is more than 55% ethnic Chinese and the other 45% is also composed of multicultural communities. There are ample opportunities for ambitious foreign actors to sway the result and change people's minds.

Mr. Damien Kurek: If I could, for the last 90 seconds or so, I'll pass it over to my colleague Mr. Brock.

You spoke about attacks on your integrity. Would you be willing to share with the committee some of those personal attacks and what you experienced?

If you can keep it to about 45 seconds, then I'll pass it over to my colleague.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Absolutely. Even until recently, when I was summoned to the commission hearing, there was still disinformation being spread on CRTC-regulated airwaves that said I was a liar, that said there was zero proof of the Uyghur genocide that I advocated against, and that said my proposed registry for foreign interference was entirely designed to persecute Chinese people.

These attacks continue. I imagine they are concerned about my running again and, therefore, harming their ability to propagate these attacks.

• (1150)

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you very much for being honest with this committee. I cannot imagine, especially for somebody with your background, the challenges you and your family faced as a result of those attacks.

I'll pass it over to Mr. Brock.

Mr. Larry Brock (Brantford—Brant, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chiu, your experience is extremely disturbing and alarming to parliamentarians and Canadians. I'm very sorry that you experienced the misinformation and disinformation campaign of the PRC and that your own government failed you miserably.

What I'm interested in, though, is more information with respect to the Liberal candidate who won the election. You talked about his amplification of the misinformation and disinformation. Can you give me more examples as to how he did that?

Mr. Kenny Chiu: From what I've gathered, it was by attending radio interviews and community events where he publicly announced that he was not going to support what he called this "anti-Asian foreign interference registry". There was zero clarification as to what exactly Bill C-282, which I had proposed, would have done. There was no mention of any country whatsoever. The fact is that it was to inject transparency into political lobbying activities, but these subtleties and intricacies were not clarified during those opportunities. By doing that, and by not helping me to clarify my character, he perpetuated and continued the assassination attempts.

Mr. Larry Brock: Did that continue for the entire writ process?

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have Mr. Fisher for five minutes, and then we have two and half and two and half. Then we're going to switch over to the second panel.

Go ahead, Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all of our panellists for being here.

Mr. Kalenský, I'm very concerned about how disinformation goes from the dark recesses of the Internet to the mainstream. It starts with a lie, presumably on the Internet. It gets amplified by fake accounts and junk media outlets. Then it becomes a hashtag. Then it becomes a bit more legitimate when ideological news out-

lets pick it up. Eventually, it lands in mainstream media or in a political party's platform or speeches.

In 2019, when a Syrian family in Halifax died in a very tragic fire, the Prime Minister retweeted my condolence post, and all of a sudden, my social media blew up with racist conspiracy theories and hate about this family and this tragic occurrence. Clearly, bad actors and bots descended on the story and spread hateful disinformation.

It makes me think about Alex Jones leading a campaign in America to dismiss the slaughter of children at Sandy Hook Elementary School. He claimed that it was staged and that grieving parents were actors. Memorial pages for the young children who were killed were inundated with vitriol towards the parents and mourners.

He recently said that he knew what he was saying wasn't true; however, and this is shocking, in 2022 a poll in *The Economist* found that almost 20% of Americans believed that mass shootings like the Sandy Hook massacre had been staged to support gun control.

Mr. Kalenský, how does this happen? How does something like this, a despicable lie from a garbage conspiracy theorist, so fully entrench itself in the minds of mainstream citizens?

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: I'm afraid I will have trouble fitting the answer in the limited time frame, because this is a very complicated subject.

I cannot tell you what the level of coordination is between Alex Jones and the very big disinformation players, by which I mean mainly Moscow; however, it seems very much like exactly the kind of work that Russia loves to do everywhere in the world. Whenever there was a terrorist attack in Europe, be it Brussels, Paris or London, every time you would see the pro-Russian channels spreading exactly the same: It was staged. It was staged for the purpose of imposing greater control on the population.

What Alex Jones was doing here was basically Russia's work. I don't know whether he was doing it because he was paid for it. I don't know whether he was doing it because he's just a useful idiot abused by Russian disinformers, but he was essentially doing that.

The way these campaigns achieve such a magnificent result is mainly through the sheer numbers. It's not just social media; it's also the traditional media. The Russian state-controlled ecosystem, the proxy ecosystem like Infowars, Breitbart, ZeroHedge and similar outlets are always saying that they are the only independent alternative to the mainstream, but they usually parrot Russian disinformation.

Also, there are local actors who are helping them to amplify this, be they paid agents or not. There's a lot of evidence that Russia pays hundreds of millions annually to cultivate these people to spread their disinformation campaigns: politicians, social media influencers, etc. It might also just be ideological allies; it might be just useful idiots. In certain cases, it might just be cynical individuals who know that they are lying, but it helps them for their political purposes or other goals.

• (1155)

Mr. Darren Fisher: Mr. Chiu, you heard the story about the Halifax family, the Syrian family that passed away. You heard me talk about Alex Jones dismissing the slaughter of children in schools.

Would you accept an endorsement from Alex Jones, or would you reject categorically that endorsement?

Mr. Kenny Chiu: I'm not fully aware of what he said. In fact, I don't pay much attention to Alex Jones.

The only consideration I have is imagining what would happen if disinformation were being spread on WeChat in a language that is not one of the official languages and what kind of discourse we would have. What kind of response are we going to have?

Parliamentarians won't even be aware of the disinformation and misinformation being spread. That's why I keep saying, on WeChat, on TikTok and on Douyin, that these are platforms that are problematic for us. They are controlled by foreign actors. These are dictatorial regimes that are interested in harming the very peaceful harmony that we have in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chiu and Mr. Fisher.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Ms. Gaudreau. You have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

As I have only two and a half minutes of speaking time, I think I have more requests than questions.

Mr. Bridgman, you mentioned a number of studies conducted in the United States, and we at the committee would like to have them, along with any additional information such as changes in level of commitment to democracy. That's what concerns us. The bottom line is that we want to find ways to address things that might happen.

There was discussion about reducing the amount of disinformation. Can you suggest to the committee any approaches that might help us come up with better legislation?

Mr. Kalenský, I understand the best practices for defence. At the end, you talked about ways of fixing weaknesses. If we run out of time, I would also ask you to send us additional information, given that you didn't have enough time to fully explain everything in your opening remarks.

I'll give you the next minute to tell me as much as possible.

[*English*]

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: In case you would be interested in more detail, I will be more than happy to share with you one report on these four lines of defence. It's about 20 pages.

In this repairing of the systemic weaknesses, I think we have tools like media literacy. We see in countries where they have a higher level of media literacy—Finland, Sweden, Denmark—that there is a smaller problem with disinformation. It's not a zero problem, but it's a smaller one.

Definitely, for strategic communication campaigns, the effort to try to increase the level of trust of the audience in their institutions has to be a depoliticized stratagem. It cannot be a promotion of the current political leadership. We see in countries where there is a functioning strategic communication system that, again, the trust of the audience is higher, but it's also trying to work on decreasing the polarization, decreasing the differences between the capital and the countryside, the people with higher incomes and those with lower incomes. Again, we see in countries where there is a lower level of polarization that the problem with disinformation is smaller.

These would be the parts about repairing the weaknesses, but in case you are interested in more detail, I would be more than happy to share the text.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Gaudreau.

Mr. Green, you have two and a half minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you.

I want to allow more space for this so that we get solid recommendations coming out of the study, Mr. Kalenský, so I will ask you, with specificity, what legislative or regulatory measures in Europe or elsewhere have been successful in addressing disinformation campaigns, especially when that affects parliamentarians, whether during election periods or throughout the year.

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: I'm not really sure that you would find legislative measures targeted only at disinformation campaigns that targeted elections. I think it would be more broad. I think it would be regardless of the election cycle.

We saw the most aggressive measures, like outright bans. Most of them have been in Ukraine, but also, in the EU, there was a ban on Russia Today and Sputnik. Ukraine has gone further. They also banned channels not owned by the state, but channels still spreading the same disinformation that was being spread by the channels owned by Russia—channels owned by a Ukrainian oligarch, Victor Medvedchuk.

Most of Europe has not done that so far, but these outright bans would probably be the most aggressive solution.

Mr. Matthew Green: On that point, though, let's be clear. Regardless of who owns it, particularly the private sector—you look at Meta, you look at X—if that information is for sale anyway, is it your assertion that we ban all platforms?

I know that in the United States, the Republicans, and even some Democrats, I think, are pushing for the banning of TikTok, yet you look at Cambridge Analytica and the lead-up to January 6, and that insurrection certainly wasn't based on TikTok.

I wonder if you could comment about whether or not the outright bans of these platforms are more theatre than an actual application of a sound policy that wouldn't just see them migrate to other commercial interests like Meta or X.

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: We definitely see the information aggressors adapting to these measures and migrating to different platforms, but there has been some research, although unfortunately just anecdotal, that they always lose at least some of the audience, not all of it, but at least some of it, and this is sometimes—

Mr. Matthew Green: Just quickly, before we end, I want to go back to the parliamentary thing.

Would you care to comment? Do you think there should be an opportunity for us to look at the way political parties use these? If we're talking about bans, do you think we might want to look at legislation so that partisan political parties could not use these types of tools when it comes to profiling and targeting of people based on algorithms and misinformation?

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: I'm afraid that with five seconds to think, I can't really give you a proper answer.

Mr. Matthew Green: Could you submit something for us, for the benefit of the committee?

Mr. Jakub Kalenský: Yes. I will be happy to think about it.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We like to work on timelines here, Mr. Kalenský. If you could get it to us by Friday, I would appreciate it on behalf of the committee. We have very limited time for our study, so we have to make sure all the information comes in.

That concludes our first panel for today.

Mr. Kalenský, Mr. Bridgman and Mr. Chiu, thank you for taking the time to be here today and share your information with the committee. It was very helpful.

We're going to suspend for a few minutes while we change over the panel.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1200) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1205)

[Translation]

The Chair: I'm now calling the meeting back to order.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses who will be appearing during the second hour of the meeting. We have Mr. Patrick White, associate professor of journalism at the Université du Québec à Montréal Media School, appearing as an individual.

[English]

From MediaSmarts, we have Matthew Johnson, who is the director of education, and Kathryn Hill, who is the executive director.

Mr. White, we're going to start with you.

[Translation]

You have five minutes for your opening address.

Mr. Patrick White (Associate Professor of Journalism, Media School, UQAM, As an Individual): Good afternoon, everyone.

I'd like to thank the committee members for the invitation.

I've been a journalist since 1990 and a professor of journalism at Université du Québec à Montréal for five years.

I believe that 2024 represents a crossroads for disinformation and misinformation. Content automation has proliferated with the launch of the ChatGPT 3.5 AI chatbot in 2022. Not only that, but a Massachusetts Institute of Technology study published in 2018 shows that false news has been circulating six times faster on Twitter than fact-checked news. That's cause for concern.

Things have gotten worse on X, formerly called Twitter, over the past 18 months, since it was taken over by businessman Elon Musk, as a result of several announcements, including the possibility of acquiring a blue checkmark, meaning verified status, simply by paying a few dollars a month, along with the reinstatement of accounts like the one held by former U.S. President Trump, who is himself a major vector of disinformation.

These social network algorithms clearly promote content that generates the most traffic, meaning comments, "likes" and sharing, which amplifies the spread of extreme ideas that we've been seeing in recent years.

One current concern is Meta's blocking of news on Facebook and Instagram in Canada since the summer of 2023, which further fuels the growth of disinformation and misinformation by suppressing news from Canadian media, except for sports and cultural news.

A recently published study that was quoted by Reuters says:

• (1210)

[English]

comments and shares of what it categorised as "unreliable" sources climbed to 6.9% in Canada in the 90 days after the ban, compared to 2.2% in the 90 days before.

[Translation]

On the political side of things, I believe efforts should be made to get the news back on Facebook and Instagram by the end of 2024, before Canada's federal elections. The repercussions of this disinformation are political. For example, on Instagram, you now have to click on a tab to see political publications. They've been purposely blocked or restricted by Meta for several months now. The experience is unpleasant for Canadians on Facebook, because more and more content of interest to them from major Canadian media outlets is being replaced by junk news. This reduces the scope of what people are seeing, is harmful to democracy, and also leads to less traffic on news sites. According to a recently published study from McGill University, to which our colleague who testified earlier contributed, news is being replaced by memes on Facebook. It reports the disappearance of five million to eight million views per day of informational content in Canada.

The Canadian government will also have to take rapid action on the issue of artificial intelligence by prohibiting the dissemination of AI-generated content, like deep fake images and audio. Bill C-63 is a partial response to prejudicial content, but it doesn't go far enough. More transparency is needed with respect to AI-generated content.

Oversight is also urgently needed for intellectual property. The Montreal newspaper *Le Devoir* ran an article about that this morning. What are the boundaries? I encourage you to quickly develop legislation to address this issue, rather than wait 30 years, as was the case for Bill C-11.

Canadian parliamentarians also need to declare war on content farms that produce false news on request about our country and other countries. Foreign governments like China's and Russia's often use that strategy. We mustn't forget that 140 million people were exposed to false news in the United States during the 2020 election. That's clearly very troubling in view of the coming U.S. election this fall. I am also amazed that Canada has been allowing the Chinese Communist Party to continue spreading propaganda press releases on the Canadian Cision newswire for years.

To conclude, I'll be happy to answer your questions. Canada needs to be on a war footing against disinformation, whether generated by artificial intelligence or manually. Stricter rules are required for generative artificial intelligence and for the protection of intellectual property owned by Canadian media and artists, who should be benefiting from these technological advances over the coming years.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for your address, Mr. White, and for having kept to your speaking time.

[English]

Ms. Hill, you have five minutes to address the committee.

Go ahead, please.

Ms. Kathryn Hill (Executive Director, MediaSmarts): Good afternoon, members of the committee. My name is Kathryn Hill. I am proud to serve as the executive director of MediaSmarts. Our

office is located on unceded Algonquin Anishinabe territory. We are grateful for the invitation to appear today as part of this study.

I'm joined today by MediaSmarts' director of education, Matthew Johnson.

MediaSmarts—if you haven't heard of us—is Canada's centre for digital media literacy. We are a not-for-profit charitable organization, and our vision is that all people in Canada be empowered to engage with all forms of media confidently and critically.

To achieve this goal, we advance digital media literacy through world-class research, education, public engagement and outreach. Through our programs, people in Canada learn to become active, engaged and informed digital citizens.

Digital media literacy is essential to an informed and engaged populace and electorate. Canada is especially in need of a coordinated approach that moves beyond only access and skills-based understandings of digital media literacy.

The recent increase in visual disinformation, manipulated images, bots and artificial intelligence, or what we talk about as deep-fakes, requires that we seriously engage in countering disinformation.

A recent report from StatsCan confirms that about 43% of people in Canada are feeling overwhelmed by these massive shifts in technology and information. For example, photographs and videos used to serve as proof that something occurred or happened in a particular way are no longer reliable. Research shows that people of all ages and beliefs are vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation. People in all sectors, including parliamentarians like you, need to know how to verify information and how to tell the difference between reliable and unreliable sources.

We need to promote information verification as a social norm and habit in Canada. Knowing and practising verification skills empowers citizens to mitigate the potential impact of disinformation and other online harms they encounter.

Digital media literacy education has been shown to be an effective approach to addressing misinformation. Around the world, there have been successful interventions with audiences ranging from elementary students to seniors. Our own Break the Fake program and materials have been found to be effective in both our own evaluations and those done by independent evaluators.

The last five years have also shown that not all approaches are equal. Most importantly, it is essential to focus on discernment over just debunking. Many interventions aimed solely at teaching people to recognize misinformation have a side effect of reducing trust in reliable sources, essentially teaching people to be cynical instead of skeptical.

As well, evaluations have identified three essential elements of a successful digital media literacy intervention. First is a focus on critical thinking and intellectual humility. Second is practical instruction in information triage. Finally, successful interventions recognize that in the networked world that we are all a part of, we are not just consumers of information but also broadcasters of information. Digital media literacy is essential to combat this misinformation and disinformation.

For parliamentarians, as elected public figures, the stakes of authenticating and verifying information online are even higher, given that you have a wide public reach and are considered trusted sources of information. When a trusted source or leader makes a misstep and spreads misinformation, the effects can reach a large and broad audience of Canadians and can erode people's trust in institutions, specifically the government.

Parliamentarians and their staff need support to build their digital media literacy skills when it comes to verifying information online.

Given all of this, I would like to conclude by providing two recommendations.

First, we recommend that Parliament, in both the House and the Senate, require mandatory training for all parliamentarians and their staff on how to verify information and combat misinformation and disinformation.

Second, as we have recommended consistently for 15 to 20 years, we recommend that the Government of Canada develop a digital media literacy strategy that would include supporting all people in Canada in developing the skills to navigate the online information ecosystem confidently and critically.

Thank you for your attention.

● (1215)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hill. Thank you for being on time as well.

We're going to start our first six-minute round with Mr. Brock.

Go ahead.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for their attendance.

I'm going to start with you, Mr. White.

I'm reading from an article entitled "AI-powered disinformation is spreading—is Canada ready for the political impact?" It starts by talking about a story regarding Slovakia's national election last fall:

Just days before [the] election last fall, a mysterious voice recording began spreading a lie online.

The manipulated file made it sound like Michal Simecka, leader of the Progressive Slovakia party, was discussing buying votes with a local journalist. But the conversation never happened; the file was later debunked as a "deepfake" hoax.

On election day, Simecka lost to the pro-Kremlin populist candidate Robert Fico in a tight race.

While it's nearly impossible to determine whether the deepfake file contributed to the final results, the incident points to growing fears about the effect products of artificial intelligence are having on democracy around the world—and in Canada.

According to Caroline Xavier, head of the Communications Security Establishment, "This is what we fear...that there could be a foreign interference so grave that then the electoral roll results are brought into question." She continued, "We know that misinformation and disinformation is already a threat to democratic processes. [AI] will potentially add to that amplification. That is quite concerning."

What is Canada currently doing, in your opinion, to address this threat, or what should it be doing?

● (1220)

Mr. Patrick White: Canada is already working hard with what it did with Bill C-18 and Bill C-11 for Canadian content, and with Bill C-63 it's going to fight misinformation and *contenu préjudiciable* as well. Are we doing enough? Probably not, but AI is an opportunity as well as a threat.

As far as deepfakes are concerned, I would strongly urge the government to legislate on that matter within the next 12 to 18 months, especially on deepfake videos and deepfake audio, as well, which you mentioned.

We have a lot to work on in the next 12 months on that issue, taking into context the upcoming federal election in Canada.

Mr. Larry Brock: That's correct.

I'll turn now to Ms. Hill and Mr. Johnson.

Thank you for your attendance. I enjoyed our discussion in my office a few weeks ago.

I listened to your opening statement very carefully, Ms. Hill. You talked about some suggestions for parliamentarians moving forward: mandatory training and a digital media strategy for the government as a whole. Can you add a little more meat to that particular discussion, please?

Ms. Kathryn Hill: Certainly. Would you like it around the digital media literacy strategy?

Mr. Larry Brock: I'd like it around both.

Ms. Kathryn Hill: We know that most of us have not received education on how to verify information well. Certainly, those of us who are beyond a certain age have not received any, ever. However, additionally, the information environment is changing so rapidly, as are the volume and velocity of information that we're receiving. What used to be a reliable source—and how you only went to one or two sources—doesn't exist anymore. There's a huge menu available to us.

We think that folks who work for government, parliamentarians and their staff, are as vulnerable as any of us are to being fooled, to reading something and not knowing how to verify well and easily, in both their personal lives and their professional lives. We know there are really easy skills that folks can learn very quickly that will help them feel confident about the information they're consuming, about knowing what's a reliable source and how to identify it, and then about sharing good information. That's what we really need to see happen.

Mr. Larry Brock: What are your comments on the media strategy?

Ms. Kathryn Hill: Other nations in the world, we heard referenced earlier this morning, have had strategies in place, some for more than 15 years. However, certainly most countries in the world are adopting strategies that address this from a holistic perspective, appreciating that it's a complex problem.

There are so many factors that impact so many different government departments—all levels of government. We need to bring everyone together to look at how we're going to address this problem, because it's only going to get worse.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you, Ms. Hill.

I cede the rest of time to my colleague Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thanks very much, Mr. Brock.

Welcome. I appreciate the work you do.

Likewise, when we had a chance to have a discussion on developing a national strategy, I mentioned that under the Harper Conservative government there was a national financial literacy framework that I think would provide a great model for helping promote the sorts of things you're talking about.

I would simply ask this, for Canadians who might be watching: With regard to the resources that MediaSmarts has for parents, young people, teenagers and people who might have a little bit of snow on the roof, how would they access those resources through your organization?

Ms. Kathryn Hill: Everything we do is free. Everything is available on our website. In English it's mediasmarts.ca—thank you for letting me do this—and in French it's habilomedias.ca. Everything is always fluently bilingual and available to educators, trusted guardians and parents. There are even some resources for youth themselves.

If you have any questions about media or the digital space, please access our website. It's all there for you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kurek.

Ms. Damoff, you have six minutes. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all three of our witnesses for being here today.

Mr. White, I'll start with you. Ms. Hill mentioned “trusted sources”. I would argue that most Canadians would think that political parties are trusted sources, but there are conspiracy theories that are being actively promoted by the Conservative Party: that the pandemic was a plot by global financial elites trying to re-engineer

our economy; that our climate policies are an attempt to limit movement and create 15-minute cities to limit personal freedom, even though 15-minute cities are a legitimate urban planning concept that's been twisted around; and even that the World Economic Forum is an elitist global conspiracy controlling governments around the world.

Just a few minutes ago at the finance committee, Yvan Baker asked “who the most dangerous dictator in the world” is. One after another, three Conservatives members said it was Justin Trudeau, to which Mr. Baker responded, “It's actually Vladimir Putin.”

When we have legitimate parties promoting this kind of discourse among the Canadian public, it leads to mistrust in our democratic institutions. I'm wondering if you could speak to how dangerous it is when we have trusted sources, or what should be trusted sources, spreading this kind of information.

● (12:25)

Mr. Patrick White: The mistrust overall is targeting institutions, including the media and politicians. One of the other factors that we should also consider is the development and the increase of news avoidance from Canadians in the past few years, especially after two long years of the pandemic. I think news avoidance is truly a really big factor to consider.

How can we fight news avoidance? I believe that media literacy programs—compulsory, as Quebec has announced starting in September 2025—could be a solution, among others, to fight disinformation at the media level and also at the political level.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

Ms. Hill, MediaSmarts has been doing this work since the mid-1990s, so you've seen a lot of change over the years. I wonder if you can comment on how the landscape has changed and what impacts you're seeing on not only politicians but also society in general.

Ms. Kathryn Hill: I'll start, and my colleague may join.

How has it changed? Everything has changed, really. I think one of the pieces that's really helpful to think about is that each one of us used to receive information. We were at the receiving end of media. It was fed to us. We basically trusted it. As the Internet grew, our information grew. We're talking about information, not news, and it's important to make that distinction. We're also talking about each and every one of us being at the centre of a huge system and network. Those networks are vast and immeasurable, frankly. Something we put online can go to 10 people or 10 million people; we don't know.

How we all communicate, then, is very, very different. An added challenge is the volume and the velocity of the information that is overwhelming people and contributing to that news avoidance. The biggest change is that we no longer have the luxury or the privilege of just receiving. We have to actively engage. We have to be educated. We have to be critical thinkers. We have to verify. We have to determine for ourselves what's reliable. We need to build the resilience of our citizens so that they can also learn those skills and know how to do that for themselves, because that is the best way to combat this.

We need regulation, absolutely. There's no question. We need all sectors of society participating in this, but from our perspective, our expertise is on what works and what will help at the individual level on the ground, and we know that education will do that.

Mr. Matthew Johnson (Director of Education, MediaSmarts): I would add, too, that the most recent major change has been the use of recommendation algorithms and sorting algorithms that curate our information ecosystem.

We have moved on from an environment in which most of the information we consumed was curated by humans. Even if we didn't necessarily have access to the rooms where it happened, those processes were documented. They were understandable.

We're now in a situation where that is being done in a way that is not knowable to the consumer and, in many cases, is not knowable even to the people who operate the platforms. These are artificially intelligent, machine-learning algorithms, and they frequently make decisions based on data or proxy data that may be inaccurate, that may be discriminatory and that may, in some cases, lead people who have already begun consuming some conspiracy- or disinformation-adjacent information down rabbit holes.

However, in the even broader sense, it makes us alienated from our information ecosystem, because we don't know how these decisions are being made. We know from our own research and research that's been done elsewhere that this is not inevitable, that people can take more control over their information diet, and that people who have a self-curated media diet are more resilient to disinformation.

That's the latest major addition to our digital media literacy approach. It's something we're constantly iterating on the basis of changes in the environment and new research.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johnson.

Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

[Translation]

Go ahead, Mr. Villemure. You have six minutes.

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hill, you spoke about critical thinking: Is that something that has disappeared from society?

[English]

Mr. Matthew Johnson: I certainly wouldn't say that critical thinking has vanished from society. It's a difficult thing to measure, but what we do know is that, as Ms. Hill referenced, the heart of critical thinking is intellectual humility. It is being willing to recognize that we might be wrong. It is being willing to set standards under which we would change our minds.

We do know that, in general, the English language media environment and, insofar as I know, the French language media environment have become more polarized. That remains less true in Canada than in the United States, but it has become more polarized than it was in the past.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you.

Mr. White, thank you very much for coming today. In view of your reputation, you were the right person to invite. However, I missed the beginning of your address. Could you send your notes to me?

Mr. Patrick White: I previously sent the notes to the committee, along with all my sources. I'd be happy to send them to your office.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much.

I have a few brief questions to fire at you, followed by some more general questions.

The Computer Research Institute of Montreal developed an algorithm capable of identifying deep fakes before they can do any harm. Is that credible?

Mr. Patrick White: Yes, definitely. There are also tools, like CrowdTangle, that can identify whether information is viral or not, but Meta is unfortunately going to block access to them for researchers and colleagues.

So it's possible with that kind of technology to identify something that could become viral very quickly. It's been around for a few years now. The media often use it to make decisions about their home page, or to decide on what news they are going to release quickly to Internet users.

Mr. René Villemure: Do you think an application like TikTok can condition some segments of the population?

Mr. Patrick White: One of the current dangers of TikTok is that it gets used as a search engine by 10 to 30-year-olds, when it's obvious that TikTok isn't a search engine. There are also clearly serious risks of sending data about Canadian users to the Chinese Communist Party government.

The United States set a 270-day deadline before it will be blocking TikTok at the beginning of 2025, and Canada needs to consider doing so as well. TikTok has become a major source of information among young people. It has also become a search engine used by many young people instead of Google. This might give rise to serious concerns about the future.

Of course, TikTok is primarily used for social networking and entertainment, and it is not a news network.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much.

Do you think that over time, with false news, alternative facts and so on, that lying has become socially acceptable?

Mr. Patrick White: It's true that amplification by social networks, together with political polarization and a loss of confidence in the media are contributing to it. But I wouldn't go that far.

Mr. René Villemure: Previous studies have noted that the truth isn't available to everyone, and that it's been replaced by the plausible.

Mr. Patrick White: Yes indeed. That's why I'm arguing this morning for the establishment of a compulsory media and digital media education program in Canada's elementary and secondary schools. Digital education could also be provided to seniors.

Did you know that when you publish something on social networks, it could end up on the front page of the National Post the next morning and be read by 10 million Canadians? If everyone knew that, they would think far more than twice before publishing information on social networks. By the way, I never use the expression "social media", because they're not media.

• (1235)

Mr. René Villemure: You're absolutely right.

Mr. Patrick White: You won't find Facebook sending reporters to Moosejaw or Rimouski.

The news media need to be protected. I'm pleased about the renewal of the Canada Media Fund and the importance being assigned to financial support for our media. We don't want them to disappear in the short, medium or long term.

Mr. René Villemure: I fully agree. We believe that support for local media is very important.

You spoke just now about news avoidance. Those media that were using Facebook as their main avenue of dissemination have been cut off from its network. Is Facebook's decision to block news contributing to news avoidance?

Mr. Patrick White: Yes, definitely. Action of that kind has to be considered bad corporate citizenship. It's unacceptable for news to be blocked in Canada. We are the only G-7 country without access to news that reports events like forest fires in the Northwest Territories. The U.S. elections will be held in early November, and the next general election in Canada will probably be next year. This blocking is indeed becoming a major problem for Canadian society as a whole.

Mr. René Villemure: Can we expect to see deep fakes used in the U.S. and other elections?

Mr. Patrick White: Yes, definitely. The media are often required to be transparent about the tools they use. Most of the media now have a charter under which they are required to indicate whether artificial intelligence software has been used. So the media are being transparent, but full transparency from the social networks about their algorithms should also be required.

The good news is that there are agreements on the role of the media and fact-checking among the major international press agencies like the Canadian Press, Agence France-Presse and the Associated Press. So videos can be streamed in only a few minutes or a few

hours. But the future looks bleak, because there will certainly be deep fakes during the next federal election.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

[English]

Thank you, Mr. White.

Mr. Green, you have six minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much.

I would like to try to the best of my ability to get through this round and allow each of the guests to be able to answer, because it is ultimately our responsibility to get back some good recommendations, and while they were put forward in the opening remarks, I wanted the opportunity for our guests to be able to expand on them.

Could you provide examples of best practices in other jurisdictions of countering disinformation, misinformation and malinformation in the work of parliamentarians?

We can go from Mr. White over. The order of operations doesn't matter here.

Ms. Kathryn Hill: I'll start.

I can't speak specifically to the work of parliamentarians per se, because we haven't researched that. We have looked at society writ large, all citizens, and we have made the assumption that parliamentarians are citizens as well; hence, what is valuable to citizens will be valuable to parliamentarians and their staff as well.

Mr. Matthew Green: Has there been any reflection or conversation around the use of these tools by political parties?

Ms. Kathryn Hill: I'm sorry; can you just clarify that?

Mr. Matthew Green: You're using your information to inform the public, but I'm wondering if, in your studies or areas of interest, you have given consideration to the way political parties could potentially use these tools and tactics to further exacerbate some of the divisions and social upheaval that we're seeing.

Ms. Kathryn Hill: We have not done that work, no.

Just to clarify—

Mr. Matthew Green: That's okay. I'll go on to Mr. White on the topic of best practices.

Mr. Patrick White: I would recommend that you look at the leadership of the European Union and the strength of 28 or 29 countries that are heavily funding media literacy programs and programs against disinformation. Look at their website and all of the conferences they have held in the past few years. The EU is the place to look at and to explore yourself.

Mr. Matthew Green: Are you finding, in your studies, that the recommendations, policies or laws put in place have yielded any kind of discernible result? Is there a way to track the effectiveness of it?

• (1240)

Mr. Patrick White: They are able to in France. They have been doing so for years and have imposed major fines on Meta and Google for lack of respect for privacy or other issues—even the push for royalties for news media organizations across the EU. Yes, they have a leadership position in all of those fields.

Ms. Kathryn Hill: There is evidence from other nations that support such strategies that the strategies are working. It was mentioned earlier this morning.

Finland is an excellent example. They have been doing this work for quite a long time. They have adopted an approach that is about educating all ages, from day care to seniors homes. They are very focused on building the capacity of their citizens to recognize and identify a misinformation or disinformation process. They have excellent evaluation and research that is showing they are much more resilient, as was mentioned earlier this morning, against any efforts to try to influence citizens with misinformation or disinformation. They're much more competent, capable and empowered.

We did a research study with funding from the Government of Canada. We talked to seven or eight different countries about the initiatives they have undertaken. We're happy to make that research and report available to you folks. Absolutely, the EU is doing wonderful work. Finland, Latvia, Australia and the U.K. have made phenomenal progress in the past four to five years.

Canada was a leader in media literacy. We have a fabulous tradition. We would love to see that continue. We're a little behind, but we have every opportunity to catch up and surpass, because we have amazing people in our country who are phenomenal experts in this area.

Mr. Matthew Green: I'll share this with you with a bit of humility—I think somebody mentioned something about one's own intellectual honesty.

There have been moments where I may have retweeted something that wasn't 100% factually correct and that caused concern or perhaps harm in communities. If you recognize this, of course, you want to delete it. You want to address it in a way that addresses the harm that was caused.

I'm wondering, Ms. Hill, whether you could provide consideration in your future work, perhaps, to helping us, as parliamentarians, create resources to ensure we're not spreading misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.

Ms. Hill and Mr. White, as well, could you also perhaps reflect on ways in which we can raise our accountability in public discourse in order to make sure the things we're talking about are, indeed, factual? Could you perhaps provide some ethical guidelines on ways, as elected officials with national platforms, we can hold ourselves to a higher level of accountability and ethical standard when it comes to this? In populist moments—I won't even say whether they're left or right populist moments—when information spreads like wildfire, I would hope our committee could come forth

in a non-partisan way with some recommendations that help reflect this.

Is that something you're willing to help with, Ms. Hill and Mr. White?

The Chair: Please give a very quick response.

Ms. Kathryn Hill: Yes, we'd be thrilled to.

Mr. Patrick White: We can, with pleasure, absolutely.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

We're going to the next round of two and a half minutes each, because there is a bit of committee business I need to take care of. We're done at 1:05 on the clock.

Mr. Kurek, you have two and a half minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thanks very much.

I hope our friends from MediaSmarts can provide that.

I have another question I'd like to ask.

Quite often, one challenge is that the conversation around information, misinformation and disinformation becomes inherently political, because it's to somebody's political advantage to simply accuse their opponents of lying. Something I hear a lot about, being a rural member of Parliament, is the firearms debate. I am not asking you to take a position on that, but that's certainly somewhere I've heard a ton of misinformation, including from political parties in this place.

How do we make sure we can provide media literacy to combat misinformation and disinformation in a way that acknowledges that there is also a valid policy and political debate to be had in the midst of what can sometimes be tough conversations?

Mr. Matthew Johnson: One fundamental aspect of digital media literacy is understanding the difference between fact and opinion. It's one of the things we teach, starting in elementary school, because it's fundamental to having any kind of reasoned debate, as you say.

Beyond dividing those two, beyond dividing whether we're discussing an opinion or facts, media literacy helps us to identify which sources of information are reliable, so it is only when we can divide opinion and fact, and when all sides of an issue are drawing from reliable, verifiable sources of information, that we can have that debate.

• (1245)

Mr. Damien Kurek: I'm pretty sure I'm close to being out of time, but would it be helpful, for example, if in the next recommendations there were something on these sites, something that simply said, "Look, here is the algorithm," some algorithmic transparency that would be beneficial, that at least that information is then put forward? Maybe just a yes or no answer from both our witnesses: Is that something that might be helpful?

Mr. Matthew Johnson: The short answer is it's complicated, but yes, there are ways of doing it and it would be valuable.

Mr. Patrick White: Yes, and transparency—total transparency—is key to fighting opacity.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Bains, go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Parm Bains (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for joining us today.

I'll begin with Ms. Hill from MediaSmarts. How far is it reaching? I have teenage kids, so I'm very interested in this topic. I also am a university lecturer, and I actually spent a full three-hour course on how to find sources, the correct sources; on how, for things like Wikipedia, people think it's real and everything on there is believable; on how far you need to actually look deeper into, say, any magazine or online page; and on how much actual research you yourself have to do to get to what a real, credible source is. I want to see how far you're reaching across Canada, for what age levels and maybe whether you're actually describing these things in that manner. This is, of course, a K-to-12 system versus university level, where there's better comprehension.

Ms. Kathryn Hill: Our reach is good, but it could be much better. We're a small organization with only 12 staff. We're project-funded, so we exist and survive by responding to calls for proposals for funding related to digital media literacy.

That being said, our worst nightmare is that we create these phenomenal resources that sit on a website that no one sees, so we work very hard to build our audience. We know that our educational resources, for example, get over a million views a year. A lot of our projects or research, when we're promoting it, will get tens of millions of views, perhaps—

Mr. Parm Bains: We have just a bit of time. I know that educators are the focus. You're telling them about your program. Therefore, are they subscribing to it? How are they receiving it, and how much further is the program going?

Ms. Kathryn Hill: We work with all of the departments of education in all the provinces and territories. We maintain an educational contact list that has over 1,500 educators at all levels of all ministries, and we promote our resources to them. We know we have thousands of teachers who are accessing our resources. Everything's available for free. Everything is tied distinctly, for every province and territory, to every curriculum. You can be a grade 8 math teacher in Newfoundland and find a lesson related to media literacy, or a grade 3 English teacher in the Yukon.

Mr. Parm Bains: Then, what are the results—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bains, that's two and a half minutes.

Thank you, Ms. Hill.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Villemure, go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. White, we're here at the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. In our report, we will be making recommendations about disinformation and misinformation. I would like to give you the two minutes of speaking time I have left so that you can tell us what you would recommend to mitigate the

negative effects or consequences of disinformation and misinformation.

[*English*]

Mr. Matthew Green: On a point of order—my apologies—I really enjoy Mr. Villemure's interventions. Unfortunately, the translation's not being broadcast through the English channel.

The Chair: Okay. We'll attempt to work on that. I've stopped the clock.

• (1250)

Mr. Matthew Green: I can hear the interpretation now.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Villemure, please start over. You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. White, our committee, the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, has to make recommendations on the negative consequences of disinformation and misinformation. I would like to give you the rest of my speaking time so that you can tell us what recommendations you feel we should be putting in our report.

Mr. Patrick White: As I said earlier, it's very important to quickly adopt legislation to prohibit video and audio deep fakes, whether pornographic or otherwise.

Canada needs better oversight of artificial intelligence, and of generative AI in particular, which uses chatbots. The social networks need to be totally transparent about their algorithms and the current absence of clarity has to end.

Another of the four major objectives for the short, medium and even long term would be to introduce civic education on media, information and disinformation in Canada's elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities. And why not make it available to seniors, who only learned about computers later in life? I learned about them with Apple in 1984, and I didn't have a cell-phone until 2002 or 2003.

To conclude, I would add that financial support for the news media must continue if our information ecosystem is to survive.

Mr. René Villemure: Could the European Union standards be considered a good starting point for drawing up this sort of legislation?

Mr. Patrick White: The European Union, which represents some 30 countries, is certainly very influential. We could indeed build on its approach, and also on France's statute prohibiting false news during election campaigns.

We don't want to expand censorship in Canada, of course—quite the opposite—but we could draw inspiration from the French statute to try and combat disinformation, particularly during federal, provincial and municipal election campaigns.

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much.

Ms. Hill, could you briefly tell us what you would recommend to mitigate the negative impact of disinformation and misinformation? If you don't have time to finish, you could send us your comments in writing after the meeting.

[English]

Ms. Kathryn Hill: They would be almost identical to Mr. White's.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Okay.

[English]

Ms. Kathryn Hill: Obviously, we're terribly biased, but we believe 100% in education, and the evidence supports it. We need to have education for our citizens—our children, youth, adults and seniors. Over the past five years we've learned, with the support of evidence, that it really works and does make a difference. We just need to reach everyone and provide them with that opportunity.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Green, for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you.

I should note that there were some additional interpretation issues on the back end of this broadcast, but I digress.

Although education is certainly a big, proactive step on the continuum of misinformation and disinformation, I wonder if the witnesses could provide some insight, again, in terms of accountability from their perspective. If there's anything missing, what should we be considering at this committee as recommendations to help provide better legislative, regulatory and, in some instances, perhaps criminal responses to accountability for the willful spread? I give reference to the way in which these are sometimes used to instill hate, incite political and social violence and target minority groups. I referenced the trans community, the indigenous community, the Black community, the Jewish community and the Muslim community, you name it.

Could you reflect on how we can better hold people accountable? This could include platforms or corporations, more broadly.

Mr. Matthew Johnson: Outside education we don't have recommendations on policy, because that's outside our mandate. What I can say from our research is that many people who have been victims of some of the things that you've been describing have said that when they have gone to law enforcement for support, the peo-

ple they've encountered have not been sufficiently well informed about these phenomena.

Just as it is important to have policy-makers and parliamentarians trained in these issues, it's very important to support law enforcement and make sure that they have been educated in these issues. Then, when someone comes to them with one of these issues, or, for instance, has been the victim of pornographic deepfake technology, which we know is in fact the vast majority of uses of that, they are familiar with the laws and regulations. They would understand enough about the digital media world that they would be able to help.

● (1255)

Mr. Matthew Green: That's good. Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Mr. White.

Mr. Patrick White: First of all, we need to protect, ASAP, the intellectual property of media and artists across Canada from the effects of AI right now. It will have a huge effect on intellectual property in Canada. Prohibit the use of deepfakes, ASAP.

As far as social networks are concerned, we need to legislate to impose and compel total transparency of algorithms to better understand what's going on in terms of the flow of information and disinformation.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. White.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

That concludes the panel.

I want to thank all of our witnesses, Ms. Hill, Mr. Johnson and Mr. White, for being here today and participating in this important study. On behalf of Canadians, thank you for your work. On behalf of the committee, thank you for coming. I'm going to dismiss you.

We are going to deal with a bit of committee business here. As you know, we received a letter from the RCMP commissioner based on Mr. Green's request. The letter came in on April 26. That's in relation to SNC-Lavalin.

I just want to inform the committee that we're still waiting for the translated documents from Mr. Wernick. What I need the committee to consider is where we go, based on what we've received not just from the RCMP commissioner but also from Mr. Wernick. I expect that should be coming soon from translation.

I know that the study called for one meeting, but if there's any consideration that any additional work needs to be done on this, I want the committee to consider that as we move forward.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I'm a little confused. Are you asking us to approve something now, before we even have the information?

The Chair: No. We've received information from the RCMP commissioner. We'll be getting the other information from Mr. Wernick. We have not finalized the study. Based on this and on what we get from Mr. Wernick, I'm going to need direction from committee as to where you want to go on SNC-Lavalin.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Do you know when we're getting it translated?

The Chair: It should be coming soon. The expectation was the 29th, which was yesterday. It should be coming soon.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Okay, thanks.

The Chair: Go ahead, Monsieur Villemure.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: I have a scheduling question. I'd like to know how much time has been allotted for the discussion about the committee's work, given that our presence is required elsewhere. Is the meeting ending at 1:00 p.m.?

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Barrett has something he'd like to say. We'll be done at 1:05.

Go ahead, Mr. Housefather.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Mr. Chair, I want to mention that I found some things in the RCMP letter a bit strange, in particular blaming the war in Ukraine for the delay in terms of the transmission of the information. Would there be a consideration to ask them further questions about that?

The Chair: We could.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Having read the response, I—

The Chair: This is why I brought it up today. There are some things that perhaps were of concern to committee members. If there are concerns, I would ask that you address them to the clerk.

Again, consider it as we move forward on the SNC-Lavalin issue, because we haven't completed that study. It's pending this information and the other information from Mr. Wernick. We may, in fact, want to call Commissioner Duheme back. We may want to provide some clarification. We've certainly been getting into the letter writing business in this committee lately.

Go ahead, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Chair, with the last five minutes I have a motion I'd like to move.

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(h) and in light of recent media reports, the committee undertake a study into Minister Randy Boissonnault's alleged contravention of ethics and lobbying laws forthwith; that the committee invite Minister Randy Boissonnault and Kirsten Poon to testify individually in addition to any other relevant witnesses; and that the committee report its findings to the House.

Chair, this has been circulated to all members of the committee in both official languages. I'll speak to it briefly, knowing that we have limited time.

We have a mandate at this committee to review matters of this nature, and this is just the latest in a series of unethical dealings by the Trudeau government. It's bombshell news that broke in Global News. This is a Trudeau government minister involved in lobbying the government. There is potential illegality with respect to the Lobbying Act and, of course, questions of the Conflict of Interest Act and the conflict of interest code for members.

Minister Boissonnault lost his seat in the 2019 election, and he restarted his company, Xennex, to lobby the Trudeau government, for which he was previously an MP. The minister tried to shield this from the public by hiding behind his business partner and lobbyist. Their only client was the Edmonton International Airport. They received \$25 million in pandemic recovery funds in 2021, one month before he was named the Liberal candidate and just two months before the federal election.

Meetings took place in 2021 and 2022 that helped bring in \$110 million in federal grants to the Edmonton International Airport. It was revealed that the minister and his lobbyist business partner still have ties. In fact, Mr. Randy Boissonnault withheld the name of the business that he was receiving payments from, and he failed to disclose the name of Navis Group, which was rebranded from his company. It's a bit of a sleight of hand here, Chair—the trading name versus the corporate name. Someone would have to do a corporate records search to determine that this deception was happening.

This company that he's receiving payments from is simultaneously lobbying the government, including the finance department, for whom he was the associate finance minister. They got direct access to the finance minister and Deputy Prime Minister for a meeting on hydrogen fuel development, and, within months of the meeting, Chair, the minister made an announcement at the Edmonton International Airport, awarding local hydrogen fuel initiatives with \$9.74 million in federal funds.

It's troubling. It's unacceptable. Obviously, this wouldn't be the kind of practice that Canadians would accept in private business, but it is a pattern with this Trudeau Liberal government. They're once again caught doing business unethically with taxpayer funds. It's undermining public trust. That's why we need to have hearings on this, Chair, and I look forward to the motion passing swiftly.

• (1300)

The Chair: Just so I'm clear, you're moving the motion—is that correct?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Yes, I am.

The Chair: Okay, we're in committee business. The motion has been properly moved.

Mr. Fisher, I'm sorry I missed your hand before. I'm going to give you the opportunity to speak, but we are dealing with a motion right now. Is it regarding this?

I have to adjourn the meeting at 1:05. We don't have any other resources, so either way, whether or not we start this now, it's going to end at 1:05.

You have a couple of minutes, and then I'm going to have to cut you off.

Mr. Darren Fisher: I mean, the piece in Global repeatedly acknowledged that Minister Boissonnault has always followed all of the ethics rules that apply to him as an elected official. It even includes confirmation of this from the Office of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner. Global even quoted, I believe, experts that said that was the case.

From what I can see in the article, Minister Boissonnault has done nothing wrong. I think that your motion, Mr. Barrett, is clearly reaching. Certainly, if it's something that the commissioners see an interest in studying and taking a look at.... We didn't move forward with a motion to do a study on Jenni Byrne as she was related to Pierre Poilievre in the office of the Conservative opposition leader, because it's being studied; it's being looked at by the commissioner. We'll wait to see if where there's smoke, there's fire.

I don't see this at this moment as something that this committee needs to.... You know, we've certainly got names that we can add to

that study if the committee is so eager, if the Conservatives are so eager to bring forward a conversation on this. We have names we can add to that. We can certainly make that study a bit more fulsome. There are certainly some names from Forecheck, but I would suggest that, if the commissioners feel that there's something here, they will take a peek at that. Mr. Barrett, I'm sure you remember the commissioners saying that members can reach out to them about some of their concerns, but I don't see that as something that should be started here at this committee and impede the things we've worked on and the calendar we've built of the things that we want to study.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fisher.

Ms. Damoff, I have you on the list, so when this resumes—if it resumes—you will be the first on the list.

Unfortunately, we've run out of resources. I'm going to have to adjourn the meeting.

I want to thank the clerk, who's stepping in for Nancy today, as well as our analysts and our technicians.

This meeting is adjourned.

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